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Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation: follow-up to policy recommendations of the General Assembly and the Council

Assessment of the value added of the joint meetings of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In the light of the comments of the Executive Committee of the United Nations Development Group (the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Executive Directors of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Food Programme (WFP)), the present report reviews the value added of the joint meetings of the Executive Boards and their impact on the operational activities segment of the Economic and Social Council and makes suggestions for further consideration of the issue by the Council. The key consideration should be the contribution of current or alternative arrangements in advancing the basic policy objective of greater system-wide coherence in support of countries' development priorities and agreed development goals that are guiding the Council's work and the forthcoming triennial policy review of operational activities.

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I. Introduction[1]

1. The present report has been prepared for consideration by the Economic and Social Council, in accordance with paragraph 28 of Council resolution 2003/3 on a triennial comprehensive policy review of the United Nations operational activities for development, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General, in due consultation with the funds and programmes, through the Executive Committee of the United Nations Development Group, to submit to the next substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in 2004 a report on the assessment of the value added of the joint meetings of the Executive Boards and their impact on the operational activities segment of the Economic and Social Council, and to make recommendations as appropriate.

II. The value added of the joint meetings of the Executive Boards: views of the members of the Executive Committee of the United Nations Development Group

2. In pursuance of the Council's request, the members of Executive Committee of the United Nations Development Group (the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Executive Directors of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Food Programme (WFP)) were requested to provide their assessment of the joint board meetings. In response, the members conveyed the following collective views.

3. The Committee members stressed, at the outset, that they considered the joint board meetings to be a very important issue for the effective governance of the funds and programmes, as well as for their continued efficient operations.

4. They further observed that in order to set the issue in a proper context, it was useful to recall the format and impact of the joint meetings flowing from General Assembly resolution 52/12 B of December 1997. As a result of that resolution, the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA and UNICEF organized their respective annual sessions to take place in New York over two successive weeks. This has allowed delegates from Member States worldwide to maximize their efficiency and participate in the work of all three organizations in a single trip to New York. The exception to this practice is the annual meeting of the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board, which meets every other year at Geneva, for which there is no advantage to consecutive scheduling. The WFP Executive Board always holds its three sessions per year in Rome and therefore operates on an independent schedule, although care is taken to ensure that there is no overlap in timing with the meetings of the other Boards and that the operational segment of the annual session takes place in June to harmonize the review of country programmes with other funds and programmes.

5. As a result of General Assembly resolution 52/12 B, there is now an annual joint meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA, and UNICEF, with the participation of WFP, which takes place in New York. Normally scheduled for January, the meeting started out as a half-day session and has now expanded to two full days. This meeting normally occurs on the final Friday of one Board session (UNDP/UNFPA or UNICEF) and the following Monday of the next Board session.

6. The current selection of up to four or five agenda items is made jointly by the Bureau members of the UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF and WFP Boards and short background papers are prepared jointly by the four secretariats. Chairing of the meeting rotates among the three Board presidents, with secretariat services provided by the organization whose president is presiding. Items selected for discussion generally cover specific operational issues or process issues of cross-cutting interest to all four Executive Committee members.

7. The joint meetings were intended to take into account the respective mandates of the individual Boards. It was not intended that decisions would be taken at the meetings. A summary record of each joint meeting is attached to the annual report to the Economic and Social Council of the four funds and programmes. In this way the Council can stay informed of the discussions in the joint meetings and can take whatever decisions it deems necessary in that context. In addition, selected issues before the joint meetings of the Executive Boards are discussed, as deemed appropriate, within the individual Boards.

8. On the basis of experience gained over the past seven years, the Executive Committee members are of the view that the joint meetings have provided a useful addition to the ongoing operational dialogue facilitating discussion of operational issues facing all four agencies. This has addressed a gap that existed between the single agency discussions on operational and policy issues in individual Boards and the more general global policy dialogue that takes place in the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

9. Despite the above success of the meetings, several shortcomings remain. While the meetings are intended to be joint, it has proven impractical to bring the entire WFP Board to New York and it is represented at the meetings by members of its Bureau. Furthermore, many of the cross-cutting programme issues addressed in the joint meetings also apply to one or more specialized agencies, whose views can now only find expression in the Economic and Social Council or the General Assembly. This can lead to some duplication of discussions.

10. Having considered experiences to date and possible alternatives for the future, the members of the Executive Committee believe it would be useful to conduct further discussions between Member States and the concerned funds and programmes about any more formal approach to the joint meetings of the Executive Boards, in particular any approach that would involve formal decision-making authority. The strength of the current structure is that it allows for agency-specific consideration of operational issues by delegates with the particular expertise and knowledge required to address the issues at hand.

11. In considering a joint meeting with decision-making authority, the members of the Executive Committee emphasized that one issue to consider would be the relationship with the Economic and Social Council and its functions and the need to avoid establishing another layer of governance, suggesting that efforts should be made to find simpler structures and to effect a reduction in costs and in the number of meetings, giving due consideration to the implications of any decisions in terms of resulting workload. The members suggested that the creation of a new decision-making body should also require resolution of a number of issues, including those of membership, bureau composition and chairmanship, rules of procedure, documentation and mandate.

12. It is the view of the four members of the Executive Committee that the Member States may wish to build on the current system of joint meetings, with submission of a summary of discussions to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly and periodic reviews to determine relevance, effectiveness and the way forward. In addition to the type of items already under discussion in the joint meetings, the members suggested several additional issues that have the potential for such consideration, such as the agencies' annual reports to the Economic and Social Council, individual United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (bearing in mind that these frameworks are owned by national authorities) and the integrated and coordinated follow-up to international conferences and the Millennium Development Goals.

13. Recalling that the governance of the funds and programmes is a matter for the intergovernmental process to decide, the members of the Executive Committee stressed that their views should be taken as preliminary advice, not as a set position, which remains the prerogative of Member States.

14. **While addressing the issue, in the light of the above comments of the members of the Executive Committee, as to how the current experiment of joint meetings of the Executive Boards might most effectively evolve in the future, the key consideration for the Economic and Social Council should be the contribution of current or alternative arrangements (such as the alternatives reviewed in paragraph 10 above) in advancing the basic policy objective of greater system-wide coherence in support of countries development priorities and agreed development goals that guide the Council's work and the forthcoming triennial policy review of operational activities.**

15. **The assessment of the Economic and Social Council should not be made in isolation, but should be approached as an integral part of the overall effort at rationalizing and strengthening the totality of the existing governance arrangements for operational activities, so that duplication may be avoided, comparative advantages duly exploited and overall capacity to advance the basic policy objective outlined above maximized.**

16. **In this perspective, the value added of joint meetings of the Boards should be assessed not only in relation to the management responsibilities of individual Boards, but also from the vantage point of compatibility with, and contribution to, an effective exercise by the Economic and Social Council of its oversight responsibilities vis-à-vis the Boards, both individually and collectively, as well as its role vis-à-vis the system as a whole.**

17. **The issue of the impact on the operational activities segment of the Economic and Social Council specifically referred to in the mandate for the present report should be addressed in this light. Any impact at this stage is only indirect, through the reports of individual Boards, because the agendas for the Boards and their joint meetings and for the Council's operational activities segment, while they may relate, at times, to the same broad issues, proceed along distinct lines.**

18. **To the extent that some of the basic aims of the joint meetings of the Boards and operational activities segment of the Economic and Social Council broadly overlap, at least in terms of advancing coordination in the overall work of United Nations funds and programmes, there should be a deliberate effort to determine what dimensions of such coordination are best pursued, through which mechanisms and/or to systematize linkages to maximize mutual reinforcement.**

Notes

[1] The present report has been prepared with contributions from United Nations system agencies, in particular FAO, IFAD, WFP and Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

Annex

Joint meeting agendas 1998-2004

January 1998	United Nations reform and its impact on the funds and programmes
January 1999	Resource flows, follow-up to international conferences, resident coordinator system Monitoring and evaluation: use of common indicators Harmonization of programme cycles; common premises and services; United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and common country assessments
January 2000	United Nations Development Assistance Framework in India
January 2001	Poul Nielson "The United Nations and Europe: active multilateral partners" Progress with common country assessment indicator frameworks Discussion with executive heads of funds and programmes Staff security
January 2002	Millennium Development Goals Common country assessments and United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks Harmonization and simplification of procedures Staff safety and security Briefing on the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan
June 2003	Simplification and harmonization Progress report on transition from relief to development Building on Monterrey HIV/AIDS: the five-year evaluation of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS Millennium Development Goals in Nepal
January 2004	HIV/AIDS: regional initiatives Simplification and harmonization Resident coordinator system Security